

A RECONSTRUCTION AND A DECONSTRUCTION OF THE VISUAL
EQUIVALENTS OF A PERSONAL (MYTH) LANGUAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Discussion of Previous Work

The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none.

from a restatement of a portion of Ecclesiastes by Jean Baudrillard in "The Precession of Simulacra"

Myths were an important source of imagery in my work. They were the impetus for visual ideas as well as being a format for the narrative aspect of the work. Myths are not simply falsehoods invented for the purpose of teaching a moral lesson but are most often based on fact and form a kind of simulation of reality within a cultural and historical framework. They are like images projected on screens that have become accepted as real because the projectionists have forgotten the projectors. A myth is a language that attempts to present an intelligibility to life, using images that revolve in an area between reality and unreality. On a social scale, they are a collective thought that represents the way a society thinks about itself and its condition; on an individual level, myths become a way of perceiving a personal

reality. The perceptions on both levels often subvert reality to the point of becoming the reality. Life is replete with contradictions and illogic but, like other systems of thought, myths strive to order life's experiences. In our culture, myths tend to be cross-cultural and historical, and on the popular level are generally short-term and based on fragments of larger beliefs.

Many of the images used in the work were taken from or allude to media sources, particularly film, television, magazines and newspapers. Most of the myths, myth fragments, and archetypes of our culture were presented in these media sources, notably the cinema. The media images were used in a direct mechanical way (projecting photographs) and as indirect sources of imagery. Stylistically, the work is ambiguous because the cool, mechanically rendered media images were juxtaposed with personal images of people and animals creating a visual tug-of-war between the various forms of expressive content. The media images, both the figures and situations presented, are generally of stock melodramatic scenes that depict sentimental, romantic and exaggerated gestures and codified character types that are recognized as fictional accounts of expression. As in film, however, they have the authority of being real.

The use of these images places me and the paintings in an ambiguous stance. They are, on one hand, models of reality, that in order to be believed, call for a certain

suspension of disbelief of both the factuality of paint(ing) and of the obvious theatricality of the image situation. They are to be believed and they are not. They are sentimental and they are not. The underlying structure of this ambiguity is that these images carry a dual coding. On one level, they are about love, good triumphant over evil and of nostalgia (an intelligibility of the past), but on another level, the content is alienation, missed cues and communications, and sexual hostilities. The actual theme expressed by the above content is the isolation and alienation of individuals in their culture-nature surroundings. One difficulty with using cliché media images was that they were often so powerful in their recognition that attempts to subvert the primary information and make manifest the latent information were often subverted by the "seductive powers" of those primary images. The subjective/expressive images referred to earlier, had been loosely associated with the borrowed images and served to enlarge the narrative nature of the work, disrupting the primary reading of the borrowed images. The distortions of scale and the perspective shifts in the work called attention to the stage around the melodrama. The reference here is to the frequent (photographic) distortions of comic book characters.

The form and materials of the paintings were largely a response to the objectives of the work. I generally used a mixed media of silkscreen, oil, acrylic and drawing. The

screen process involves drawing directly onto the screen with a paint stick then screening the drawing onto the canvas using a toned transparent base as a solvent. The screen is smaller than the image so the total image is made up of a series of rectangular printings, some overlapping, creating a mapping effect similar in appearance to the photo-products of space probes. The movement is across the surface rather than into the picture plane and does become a space more mapped out than illusionistic. As with the media imagery, which betrays a latent meaning, the subjective, expressionistically handled, invented imagery is subverted by the diagrammatic flat pattern of its structure.

The narrative base of each painting, too, is subverted by the disjunctiveness of the composition. The images seem to be accumulated in a non-rational way, only vaguely associative, but each carries enough visual and emotional weight as to preclude regarding them as such. Rather than each image being seen as mere object among the ephemera, they become elements of a fragment of an unfinished story always in the state of completion, but each carries enough visual and emotional weight as to preclude regarding them as such.

Statement of the Problem and Methodology

My interests are in finding a synthesis of the ideas and methods described above and a personal mythology/language. Questions that arise from the above are:

1. How will the form and content of my current work be affected by a more implicit narrative form?
2. How will the work be affected by:
 - a. source of imagery?
 - b. scale of images and overall works?
 - c. materials?
 - d. intent? Will the intent of my current work change because of a more linear narrative format?
3. Assuming the narrative will change from one piece to another, what will be the effect of placement of images in each work and how will the placement of each work in relation to the others be affected?

A record of the work will be accomplished by maintaining a written journal on progress and outcome. At the end of the project, a written analysis of the journal and work will be made. I intend to consider each piece on an individual basis.

CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF PAINTINGS

Discussion

The following work does not tell a story, in the traditional sense, but is about the way a number of different things go together.

Most of my influences lately have been from literature, particularly the so-called post-modern writings of Marquez, Calvino, Pinget, Coover and others. I stated in the introduction, somewhat obliquely, the aspects of post-modern literature I found so appealing, namely, disjunction, anti-illusionism, self-reflexiveness, moral entropy and medium is the message. The whole story, it seems, will never again be told. The "program" I set up for myself in the statement of the problem was a desire to synthesize (and possibly transcend) post-modern concerns with modernist and pre-modernist approaches, i.e., linearity, rationality, cause and effect, innocent anecdote, and possibly even a little middle-class morality. This synthesis was the quest that encompassed such terms as narrative, anti-narrative and personal mythology.

The first painting, Born in a Drought Year (Figure 1), has gone through a number of stages. I worked quickly and many problems were worked through on the canvas spontaneously.

This painting, from the beginning, was intended to be just one element in a larger image/idea that carried over into subsequent paintings. I had, at the outset, only a few things in mind, a simple narrative structure that moved constrictively from one painting to the next, a central "character" as a visual focus, and a rough plot (or more accurately, a theme).

The central "character," the man holding an axe, is an emotional tie-in, perhaps even an alter ego. The emotional factor carries an everyday kind of human quality even though this character (and others in earlier work) are often distorted and somewhat caricatured. Perhaps the human quality comes across because of those obvious "drawn on" elements. Distortion and caricature blunt representation and emphasize generalized human qualities (the comic, fear, joy, etc.). Images such as the "axe man" do not ask to be accepted as real--and they are not. They are sign compendiums of loosely joined qualities (humannesses). I have never intended that any of the invented characters be "comic" but they do play in an ambiguous place--they have comic references that are not based on humorous situations.

I decided to split the canvas as I had done in earlier work. But rather than carry fragments of one image from one side to another, I decided to use a different image in each section, thereby blurring relationships of both structure and content. The invented, caricatured image is an element of

fantasy, a kind of irrationality, dealing with the grotesque, surreal and the absurd. The image would become increasingly absurd as it was repeated in subsequent paintings. The image of the man, the axe, the cropped action and threat are displacements and distortions of everyday life (a little more dramatized, perhaps) and, in a sense, are like fantasy--between reality and imagination. Hidden impulses emerge in a seemingly innocent fashion.

Earlier work is from what I call the Pawn Broker period, a title based on a general feeling and derived from a movie of the 1960s. This is not a significant point beyond noticing that the work had a particular feeling that I categorized in terms of a movie. Conrad's Heart of Darkness came to mind as I worked on the later paintings. I read the story many years ago but it was not of direct importance to me other than to provide enough sufficient ambiance to set a rough theme--a theme that expressed a sense of adventure, exploration, journey, and provided narrative ghosts in vestigial haunts.

Splitting the field of Born in a Drought Year was a device used in previous work to set up a duality--a binary system (yes/no, yin/yang, his/her and the like), and the panels in the painting are specifically thought of in binaries of rational and irrational and of personal and non-personal. The image on the left was virtually finished when the right side was started (about one-fourth of the total canvas area).

The right side is the rational side or it at least exudes a feel of something rational. The exuding actually has more to do with the way the image is presented than with the image itself. I used a film-still-like framing in a few earlier works to fragment images so that they seemed to roll from the bottom to top (the standard way to look at a series of film stills). I also divided the canvas and presented a primary image (in terms of its size) on one side and used the film strip device to break that image into repeated segments, seemingly set into motion. There was, it seemed, a coldness, a mechanical ordering of the images that distanced them from the primary image.

The film strip image in Born in a Drought Year is not a segment of the image in the other panel, and in fact, does not even directly relate to it. I felt inclined to make it a more separate entity, more interesting in itself, by manipulating the multiple images. The image is of a Kabuki actor at his make-up table. The first image, the lower one, focuses on the mirror image, the reflected face (and mask), the hand and the action of make-up application. The second image is larger than the first and the view is panned back to reveal the back of the actor's head and the make-up jars on the table as well as the mirror image. The top image is slightly larger than the second and has "pulled in" to a focus on the back of the actor's head and the table top. Manipulating a single original image in such a way changes

the complexion of static repetition by adding a sense of motion, of a camera moving, of panning a fixed-in-time scene. Images in previous works were usually either taken from movie stills or invented and presented as stills--frozen in mid-action. The change of viewpoint from image to image in the right panel establishes a mini-narrative that relates to the idea of repeating images from painting to painting.

The use of mixed media in Born in a Drought Year (silkscreen, acrylic and paint stick) was a carry-over process from previous work, but much more subtractive painting was done on the silkscreen image (left side) than had been done in the past, which counteracted some of the directness and particular surface of the screen work.

The process involved drawing the image outline on a toned ground in charcoal, then painting everything but the line black. White ink was then screened onto the canvas in a random grid pattern similar to that used in previous work. The screen grids, however, were edited and reduced to compositional devices comparable to highlights in a portrait. The white area around the eyes of the left panel image, a touch of melodrama, is reminiscent of the way soft light was reflected into an actor's face in early movies (as done in the 30s movie Dracula, to intensify the hypnotic stare of the Count (Lugosi)).

The images in the right panel shift in and out of the frame on the vertical but move behind the field of the left

side which creates a curtain effect, a device, realized in this work, and carried over into subsequent work.

The paintings, He Called Her Oman (Figure 2) and Godbless the Hours (Figure 3), were started before Born in a Drought Year was finished and both were worked on alternately for several weeks. He Called Her Oman, an oil painting, seems more clearly linked to earlier work than Born in a Drought Year, because the face image is repeated and because of the use of the freeze frame device. The major distinction of this work is that the face image is a copy of the face of the left panel character in Born in a Drought Year.

The plan to have an installation of work involving a repeated image included the idea of a uniformity of scale and material. The painting He Called Her Oman immediately altered this plan by being on a smaller scale, of a different medium, and stretched, unlike the other works which are unstretched. I inadvertently freed myself to work in any medium or scale and to add any element I felt necessary. At this point the formal elements of the work were pinned down to only a divided canvas and a repeated image. I felt that scale could vary but that a larger scale was best for most of the work planned. I felt that color was to be kept at a minimum because retinal art was not an issue; the predominate use of black, white and gray would work better in the larger scale pieces and add a toughness to the work. I

also felt that reducing the use of color would be, quite simply, easier.

The repeated image (from painting to painting) seemed similar to spelling a word over and over until it no longer makes sense. The image is "mantled" repeatedly until its credibility is dismantled and it becomes an object, isolated in absurdity. The image of the man with the axe is an object without heredity, association or references except those of a mechanical or structural level--he is borrowed and is essentially just there.

He Called Her Oman is largely a response to the above idea. The focus is on the character from the previous painting which is repeated three times. The center image on the left side has more clarity and detail that sets the definition of the image (what it is, where it is from), and the top and bottom frames are such minimal ghosts of the image that they are essentially just visual noise, displaced by the louder center frame.

The right panel is a "close-up" of the same character; the focus is on the axe. The axe, unlike most objects in my paintings, moves into the picture plane thus emphasizing its objectness. The usual readings of an axe in this context (violence in particular) are subverted by its isolation in its own objectness.

The axe does have a logical place in the event depicted, however, and no blatant subversions are evident, such as

Magritte's This Is Not a Pipe. I wondered at the time if I should write below it, "this is not an axe; this is not violence." I was between what Foucault called resemblance and similitude. Resemblance refers to a primary reference, rooted in representation. The axe, for example, is a composite of the visual image and the verbal translations of it. The picture says, "here is an axe," the associative context reads "violence," "danger" and so forth. An accumulative/associative relationship is then formed with other images in the work. Coherence is applied in a linear (narrative) form.

Similitude has no pivotal reference; there is no referential hierarchy upon which to build a narrative or any other linear coherence. Things are more or less like one another and hierarchy gives way to a series of exclusively lateral relations. I felt that this series of paintings could become an endless series of repetitions or variations, free from a story or theme--that each image shift would move from the similar to the similar.

The painting, Godbless the Hours, initially had a large image that was an extreme "close-up" and enlarged frontal view of the sailor character, but this image changed as work progressed until it broke away from the repetitive series started in the two previous works. Already the plan to repeat an image from painting to painting was being subverted.

This painting has two panels and, as with the others, the right panel was painted after the left side.

The Kabuki actor in Born in a Drought Year had been chosen as an image because of an interest in the artifice in Kabuki, its surface of characters, historical links and references, stylizations and ritualized manner. It seems similar in many ways to Barthe's description of wrestling in his book, Mythologies. I have the feeling that, like a wrestling audience, a Kabuki audience does not expect reality or even an illusion of reality. In an oblique way they are aware of their witnessing and participating in a particular aspect of culture. Much of contemporary Kabuki is not noted for its turn of a good story but for whether or not it is a good vehicle for an actor to show off his talents. The major interest I have in this form of theater is the ritual bond within a cultural context that exists between the actors and the audience. My use of a Kabuki image in Born in a Drought Year and a still from a Japanese movie in Godbless the Hours are oblique references to Kabuki theater. The use of oriental subject matter is only coincidental to an interest in Kabuki and a feeling that the how of Kabuki somehow relates to the direction my work is going.

The image on the right side depicts a relationship, an interaction, as did the right panel in Born in a Drought Year. They depict something "real" that is not suspended in a "cosmi-comic" gesture but visually realistic (photographic).

The characters are in active dialog with each other and the space they occupy. As they emerge from the "curtain" (the left panel), a dialog is taken up between them and the rest of the painting.

It seems the bulk of a painting usually happens when my back is turned or when I am otherwise occupied. The fourth painting, Dust of Old Victories (Figure 4), had a number of things laid out for it as I started work--the divided canvas, the man with the axe character and the borrowed right panel image. The image sources came out of previous work.

I painted a field of light gray over the left panel and a slightly darker gray over the right panel. As I painted the gray, areas of red and green were mixed into it and incorporated into the overall surface of the field. Work on this field occupied more of my time than usual and this involvement was, in retrospect, a subconscious plan to open a more direct dialog between the images and the field. The first three paintings in the current work are very compressed spatially; the images fill the picture plane which is in contrast to earlier work where each image or image group is distanced spatially from the other image. There is greater emphasis on the space around each image in the earlier work but the focus is still predominately on the images. The space around them, rather than working as a field, is a space that is isolating and serves to enhance the enigmatic

relationships of the figures. Images in the above three works are divided by structural devices: image edges, subtle lines and shifts of value. They become a field, to a degree, because they fill the picture plane. The canvas divisions, each filled with an image, sets up a relationship between two separate image fields. This is in contrast to the isolated single images in earlier work.

The man with the axe, isolated in a field of gray in Dust of Old Victories, is near the center of the canvas. The painting was almost completed before the figure and ground shift (from figure toward field) was noticed. The figure carried more environmental information and the viewpoint panned back revealing a portion of a besailed boat or tub which is the container for the man. His pose is the same as before, axe held, pre-swing, over his head (a reverse image of the scene in Born in a Drought Year and He Called Her Oman); his left hand grips the edge of the boat and pin-naled waves lap menacingly (like shark fins) in the foreground and background. More information is given but the scene is unchanged.

Depiction of the same scene in three separate paintings harks back to an early interest in time (and timelessness). This interest is a result of having read myths. I remember reading something about repetition being timeless and magical, relying on perception and imagination (whereas science and verification exist in abstract levels of order). A narrative

is a discourse based on some form of temporal sequence of events which are its basic units. There is a time of the thing told and a time of telling it. Narratives in earlier work are fragmented in space and time, always in the process of breaking down, never complete. A tension exists between the way the work is structured (broken space, divided picture plane) and the presentation of a presumably linear, albeit short, story. Tension between the two elements is the result of neither element being first in a hierarchy of attention, presenting a distancing and a sense of timelessness. Those concerns have carried over into current work with the major change being repetition of an image from painting to painting. The image now is in a perpetual present. Time in this pseudo-story is reduced to an instant, a snapshot instant, and the time of telling is as quick as the eye can perceive the images. The telling, quickly shifts to the viewer's awareness of seeing that the telling breaks down and of a loss of interest in the narrative potential of the images.

The static nature of the left panel enhances, possibly, the apparent linear "telling" of the right panel, which is actually derived from a single image (varied three times). A tension and a dialog exists between the figures in each of these images because their edges are used as a screen to give sliding emphasis to one figure then another. This creates a feel of linear change and changing viewpoint. The

ambiguity of visual relationships of elements in the work and the overall discontinuity of the narrative is a grayish void muddling over itself, much like the initial gray field that formed the ground for this painting.

The shoe segment intruding from the lower left side (as if to threaten the sailor) is in fact an intruder from a conscious desire to congeal the fieldness of the painting--to make intentions clearer, perhaps. The angle of the shoe toe, the loose trompe l'oeil painting of highlights and details and the radical cropping make the image hard to read initially. Its dark value (the darkest in the painting) and the obvious protruding into the picture plane, enhances a feel of otherness about its origin and its relationship to the other images. The shoe is the ingredient in the formula that precipitates the field from the other ingredients.

The painting moves into an area that has more to do with silence than language, materiality of painting rather than with the presentation of images in a narrative or metaphor.

The move into the materiality of painting influenced the use of field in Icaree, Dickaree and Doc (Figure 5). The surface of the painting began as a field of "old newspaper yellow" which remains as the background color of the left panel. The small (one-fifth of the canvas) right panel is "Gray-card gray" with a repeated image of an upside-down coat, tied and hatted man. The left panel image is a repeated

image of a fragment of an image of a ballooning tragedy. The overall ground for the painting is acrylic, the left side images are paint stick, and the ones on the right side are acrylic. Over the left image a translucent black was screened in four vertical bands roughly equal in size to the right panel so there is a strong verticality to the entire work. The field is more evident because the images are less dominant visually. The images are more immediately distanced in this painting than in the other works and are made ambiguous in their separate content by either being covered by another element or by having a benign, impersonal quirkiness.

Icaree, Dickaree and Doc breaks the series. The images in this painting have a stronger borrowed and displaced feel that is more like a faded journalistic entry than a personal rendering of events. More emphasis is on surfaces, design and material. The columns of screenings refer to earlier work where movement was flattened across the surface rather than into the picture plane.

The upside-down man echos the person in the left panel, falling headfirst, whose torso has gone out of the picture. Although this is the most direct connection I have made between two panels, it does not counter the flattening of the work. No narrative develops in this work, the images are vestiges of an idea. They no longer seem to be fragments of a story but are just there. The work is a series of

elements totaling the materiality of the painting--the present tense.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

When you begin a story, the best thing to do is to say, 'I was born'...the older you get the more numerous your childhoods become.

from Robert Pinget, Mahu or the Material

Here, at the conclusion, I am like the upside-down man. There is no personal mythology, no narrative and it seems I never intended there be so. There is only the quest and no grail to linger over.

Personal mythology, a term rampant in the introduction, is a convenient capsule for the words "personal" and "mythology." The two words are very interesting but I don't think I was ever really interested in finding a personal mythology. It is possible that making art and making a living fall into the "personal mythology" category and at this point I am content to let it be so. If the above is true, then setting out to make a personal mythology is a kind of self-conscious redundancy.

Personal mythology implies that one is in touch with oneself, with all of the ramifications thereof, within the context of culture and time. My interest was in creating parallel realities out of such a defining context. A personal

mythology was not a goal but a place from which to depart in other directions.

The work in this problem moved out of a body of work that was a combination of an inarticulate and reduced fiction that, nonetheless, had a high regard for language. I anticipated doing work that involved a clean, non-redundant, beginning-middle-and-end construction (a mythology). Instead the move was to a more clean redundant work of spaces filled with objects of slight emotional weight or details of objects with few emotive variations, inflections, and up and down emphases. The stages, outlined in the discussion, finish with Icaree, Dickaree and Doc, which has a structure, mentioned above, of spaces filled with things and the surface details of things.

A linear direction in the work was not as totally repressed as this paper attests, even with its meanderings and digressions. There is an order to be found (the experience of the work itself is an event in time), but the work's linear chain of events is qualified by backward looking, cross-referencing and dead ends. The experience of viewing and reading is a matter of multiple viewpoints and re-experiencing, which echoes my experience of making the work.

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